Narrator: Connie Mason
Interviewer: Anna Marie Switzer
Date: July 22, 2024
Project: Down East Change

Anna Marie Switzer 00:00
We'll start it recording.

Connie Mason 00:01
You are in charge of this interview.

Anna Marie Switzer 00:04
This is only my third one, so I'm working on it.

Connie Mason 00:07
Okay, yeah.

Anna Marie Switzer 00:08
All right. Hi. My name is Anna Marie Switzer, and I'm here with Connie Mason, and we're working on the Change Down East project. All right, so let's get started with—well, I guess I just said your name, but what is your full name and where were you born?

Connie Mason 00:24
Anna Marie, I am Constance Williams Mason, and I was born in Morehead, but my father was from Stacy, and that's why I love Down East so much. He took me down to Stacy almost every weekend, and all my cousins are down there, and so I love the area. And I was born in December 3, 1954—yes, I am old—and, well, wait till you get there. So I've been thinking about the Park Service, and everything it's meant to me personally, and I know that has been hard on Down East, but life is hard, and change is life and we've had to cope with a lot of things going on with the Park Service, as well as in our own lives. And I do want to say that when I graduated from East Carolina University in 1977 and had my own sign shop and studio art studio and called River Rise Studios, and I was in church. And a friend of my mother's, Miss Catherine Walsh, said she saw in the newspaper an advertisement for a park ranger, and she said—I've never read the description—but she said I would be perfect for this description of this job. And so that is why I went down to Beaufort and applied for this job.

And when I came from my interview—I did not realize that it at this point, but maybe Miss Catherine did, that it was going to be music involved and storytelling and talking to the public and that type of thing about our area. And little did I know that it was going to be a life-changing experience for me personally with the Park Service, because it really started me on my career as an oral historian and historian proper. And I started my singing-songwriting. I started my songwriting because I wanted to write about things to tell people, you know, with through music, not just traditional music, but about people and places of Down East that that I love. And little did I know that my father, when I was a teenager in the ’70s, he was a county commissioner, and he was actually on the board that was asking that the Park Service that Cape Lookout become a park. And in my family's archive

somewhere, is a picture that I remember of Daddy with the rest of the county commissioners standing around in Raleigh, around the governor's desk, Governor Terry Sanford's desk, as he signed in the legislation that they wanted the park. And so, I mean, you know that came to me later, you know that was, *oh my god*, you know it must have been meant to be. But it was also when, when I came to the job, I was hired with some other summer seasonals. It was a summer seasonal job, and the Park Service was not a beloved organization by any, any, any stretch of the imagination. And they wanted me to do some oral histories. They wanted me to do some sign painting, to redo some signs that were up in Portsmouth Village. And I also learned later I would be in uniform, the gray and the green with the badge and everything. And apparently, it's because they thought that I would be more welcomed at doing oral histories than somebody else. And, you know, I always said they thought that I would not be shot before they let me talk to them, you know.

So anyway, I knew the strong, you know, strong feelings all around and I could understand them being that way, but the group of people that I was hired with greatly influenced my perception of the park and perception of my career. Wayne Martin was on there. Wayne eventually became the head of the Folklife section in Raleigh, North Carolina. Okay, he's the one who taught me. See, I didn't know I had culture. Culture to me was sticking your finger up in the air, your pinky up in the air, and speaking with the English accent. I mean, that was culture to me. And I, you know, I had, I was completely not versed in that I had a culture. And so that was a voyage of discovery for me, that I had a culture. He also, because he went to school and in folklore and he had all this experience. He gave, he gave, he kind of mentored me. He and his wife, she did not work for the Park Service, but she was a volunteer with the Park Service—Margaret—and we all became good friends. And he taught me books to read and things to give me what I needed to understand my culture, and so that's started everything for me. And it was, when I look back on it, it was, it was like, you know, I wasn't in charge, that it was meant to be this way. So anyway. And of course, the headquarters for Cape Lookout at the time was in Beaufort, North Carolina, was not out here on Harkers Island at all, and my days to going out to Cape Lookout, I went every Monday to work at the lighthouse area. At that time, the keeper's quarters had no windows, no porches, had one door, and there was no furniture. There was no lighting. There were no bathrooms. Over there at the Cape, there was nothing. There was no fresh water. You had to take everything you were going to need. And I went over there with one guy who, after we got over, we left from the Beaufort Waterfront in a small john boat to go to the Cape. Now that's quite a ways and through Middle Marsh Slough. I mean, you know the whole deal and my job at that time in the Park Service, you could not wear shorts or ball caps. You had to wear the Stetson hat, the rounds that we called the Frisbee, because when you walked out into the air, you know, there it went, and you had the Frisbee races. But you had to wear your cordovan brown socks, your wool slacks, your boots, your red wing-tip boots, and your wool shirts and carry your backpack with your water. And at that time, it was quite, kind of, quite a walk through the sand to get to where the ferry dropped the people off, and my job was to walk down there and greet them and welcome them to the island. Most of them blew right past me, because they were going surfing and fishing, and they didn't, you know, care for a tour or anything like that, because the park was kind of new. So, you know. But some of them did, and I would give a lighthouse talk. They would follow me back up to the to the lighthouse area, and I would give a talk.

And so that was my first year, and the second, the second year that I worked as a summer seasonal and by this time, Wayne Martin and Margaret were no longer there, and they did the Outer Banks Music Festival, which I was a part of, and my cousin, Worth Mason, and some other people were a part of it. It was held at the

aquarium on Pine Knoll Shores. And when I got hired back the second year, and he wasn't there, and Wayne, William Mansfield, Bill Mansfield, took over that spot, and I helped him with that, and not knowing that the third year that I got hired back, I would be in charge of the Outer Banks Music Festival. So it was a, it was a real gradual process, and the third year—now, Bill and Wayne took the same courses at school, so they were very much in in the ways of oral histories and things, and which was all kind of new to me, but they wanted to do. And there were other people who were at the park, who were not really trained in the collection oral histories, but were doing oral histories, particularly for Portsmouth Island. And so by the third year, the person that was permanently employed by the Park Service—his name was Bill Bisbee—took a course in museum collections and in oral histories, and he did not want to do any of it, so he gave me the book. And so that's how I became. I studied that book religiously. I worked in that very, very, I mean, you know, diligently because I enjoyed that. It was really great fun and there was a need for that in the park with all their collections.

So I became friends with Mary Gray Babb and Clara Salter Gaskins, who were Portsmouth residents. And Mr. Riddle was the superintendent at the time in Beaufort, and he was, he was very sensitive to the park's impact on the local community. He would take, for the ladies, you know, since they all their relatives were buried at Portsmouth, he would take Mother's Day wreaths, Christmas wreaths, and everything, and get them laid on the graves for them, you know. So they didn't have to go up there if they didn't want to. But he made sure that they, that he knew, that he knew that it was important to them. Also Mr. Riddle, the idea of being in in Beaufort, the park, I guess, the upper echelon in the Eastern Region said, we want to be consolidated down at Shell Point and Harkers Island. And he was very concerned that the people who were taking people over to the park, who weren't concessionaires at the time, still kept that livelihood, still did that, you know, that they did not want to take that away from them. But eventually it came to that, and they moved it down to Harkers Island. And, of course, the big, big thing about, you know, it was, it was a way of life that was being stopped. And it was so hard, you know, it was, it was so painful. And, and people did not like the whole fact that it was a park, you know, that it was, everything was changing, and there was a bit of greed when—see, the Park Service was not going to take the property. The state of North Carolina, you know, the federal government told the state of North Carolina, you have to get all the properties, all the titles together. The State of North Carolina has to turn it all over to us, but we don't, we don't do the bad guy stuff, you know. So, and I did oral history with the first administrative officer, Norma Clark.

Anna Marie Switzer 16:00
I read that one.

Connie Mason 16:01
You need to. Yeah, I'm glad you did, because she, the first part of her interview was her career, which was stellar and just amazing. And the second part of that interview was about dealing with the things that Cape Lookout, and it was difficult. Her lives, you know, the lives were threatened. Even one of the double wide trailers that was actually going to be my office, you know, in one of those, and I was in that, and had some exhibits that I had done in there, you know, was burned to the ground, okay. And it was no secret that it was, everybody was happy about that, except for the Park Service, of course. And we, so we started using an old building, the Scott building down at the end of Shell Point, was going to be was the visitor center. It had a window cut into it that had a spy glass that looked out at the Lighthouse. And there was a shell table there. And I worked in the

collections. I worked in the oral histories, organizing that part. And I was very concerned, because, you know, that building was very close to the water, all the files for the historic structures, paper files, were in that building with no replica. And so I convinced them to rent a microfilm machine, and I microfilmed everything they had. It was nine rolls of microfilm. It took me almost a whole 368 day appointment, a 268 day appointment, to do that. But I felt better about it, because then it could be stored in different places, you know, and not lost. Because I thought it was so valuable, and it is valuable, you know, the work they did in in that on the buildings. And like, you know, we're losing buildings, and now with climate change, who knows what the future holds. But so it was, it was a very difficult time, and it was when I when I first started in the Park Service, one of the things that impressed me was going up in the air. And at the time, Cape Lookout shared an airplane with Cape Hatteras, and we went up in the air and our—I was the last summer seasonals that got, got three weeks of training all the other from then on, you hit the ground running, and you did your own research, and you did your own training.

But we had a Chief of Interpretation, Bruce Weber, who thought it was important that we learn how to give a good program, that we trust each other, that we read the right materials, and that we always consider it to everyone that we met and talk with, no matter how we were treated. So it was a whole new world for me. I mean, I just didn't know what to do with that. But let's see, and you know, Anna Marie, that I will get off on a rabbit trail. So I'm going to try to bring myself around. This is, is this? Good, this is, yes, okay, well, the camps that were over on Shackleford and along, of course, us, Dr. Rule has been doing a lot of good, good work, getting all those documented and talking with people. So he's done some excellent work, and we're all happy that he's doing that, but, um, all the camps that were over there that had to be—now, there was this real complication of things that were going on over on Shackleford. There were no land titles, no deeds. It was quick rent and things that I don't understand about, you know, that end of it.

But there were people who knew the Park was coming, and so they basically stole a lot of land from the people, you know, and got the money for whatever, and, and that was angering. And, there was a, there was a woman. Now, Norma had told me the woman that was hired by the state of North Carolina to make sure that all this stuff was bought and the deeds and things were proper was from Down East. And she told me her name, and now I can't remember it, so I, you know, because, because as soon as her job was through, she left, she went to Arizona, or someplace out west, you know, or California, I don't know. But Norma may remember her name, and I'm sure she's probably not with us anymore, but I wanted to interview her. I mean, the worst, because that would have been, that would have been something, and not everybody. You know, Clayton Fulcher still has his property out there on Core Banks. You know, he, he never gave in to anything. He's still fighting, or his family, is still fighting that. So the people you know had such memories. I mean, it was their second home, because, you know, out on Shackleford. Let me go back just a little bit, and say the reason why we're having Diamond City Homecoming in August is because in 1899 there was a terrible storm. But before that, there was a series of terrible storms, and people were getting tired of having to rebuild their boats. Houses floated off foundations. All their gardens were ruined. It was just becoming harder and harder to live out there and so. But 1899 storm was kind of the straw that broke camel's back, as they say, and they took their houses apart and put them on skiffs. And some of them went to Salter Path, which was called the Rice Path at that time, on Bogue Banks. Some went to Morehead City, to an area that's called the Promised Land. Now, majority of them came here to Harkers Island, and some went to Marshallberg and. But they were still a community, and as a family would leave, you know, Wade Shore and Diamond City and all those other communities, Mullet Pond, all of those, you know.

They would come down as a group, you know. And some of them would sing, you know, I'm bound for the promised land, you know. And just as a community, you know, and push off the skiff. They took their houses apart, put them layer by layer, and stuck the kids in the little cubby holes, you know, they could and. And they went off and rebuilt their houses. And that's so stuck with the people who rebuilt in the, in Morehead City area. That's why it's called the Promised Land today, and the history museum has gone to some research and tried to plaque those homes that were came from the Banks and. But so, so that's what happened to all those people.

So the houses that were there on Shackleford during the part when the Park Service was being developed and coming up online, were camps and were places that they were spent summers and, you know, cookouts. And you know, it was a second home to them. And so it was special, because that was home to them. You know, being on the mainland or on the island, here was their second home. But they've always thought about Shackleford and Core Sound as their home. And so it was very painful. And a lot of people were so—did not want the people to touch their second homes—that they burned them themselves, brought them down themselves. And you know, there were several fires burning, you know, on the, on Core, or on Shackleford Banks. And it was, it was a very moving, painful time for them. And of course, you know, the Park Service had to keep on keeping on, and eventually, I say *eventually*. But it took years and years and years of trying to prove themselves that, you know, this is what we stand for, and this is, you know, we don't want it to be turned into another Atlantic Beach, you know, with condos and high rises and stuff. And those plans were already in the Park Service. There was a plan for Lighthouse Drive that went around the lighthouse. It's up in the, it's in the upstairs here in the building. You know that they were going to, there was contractors were going to build houses around the base of the lighthouse. There was, they wanted to build a bridge from Harkers Island to the lighthouse, you know. They wanted to make another deep-water port. They thought they talked about building a train trestle over to court, to the bight of Cape Lookout, you know. And you just can't imagine. You know, today, as beautiful as is there and as quiet as peaceful it is, how that would have changed everything. And if it wasn't for the Park coming when it did, it could have all been so different. We could have been another Cape Hatteras, you know, and it would have been pretty, it would change so much that it would not have been recognizable. I think people can, the people from here, like Miss Emmer and her family, when they go over to the Banks, they can still picture their life over there. And I think that's so important, you know.

And, and they still enjoy it. Don't matter if it's cold, if it's hot, doesn't matter, you know, they love it. And that's home to them. And that's where their people are from, and, and that's where they learned about God, you know, and they're in those revival meetings over there. And, I mean, that's, and then the lighthouse has always been, stands for the culture, stands for them, you know, and for who they are and what they believe in. And so to me, the Park Service was, you know, it was bad, but you know, it had to get be bad before it could be good. And I think with the coming of Bob Vogel as the superintendent, he really believed in community. He believed in, you know, doing what's good for the community, you know. And I think the leadership in the Down East community respected him and knew what a good person he was, and relied on him and his family and his outlook and the way he ran the park. I know for a fact that one of the resource management people over there at the park could not stand him, because he always, he always stood by the community. And they and, they didn't like that. They said that wasn't the, you know, that we're there, we're the Park Service. We don't have to count out to anybody. But he, he stood up for them. And so. So that was, that was the good thing for that. And now I think people see, you know, in this day and age of progress, I guess that it was the best thing of for it to

happen. But it was tough, and it was hard, and it was a change of life, and it was a change of the way of life, and it was saying goodbye to some things. I mean, some things that you won't be able to recapture, you know, but, but we try to do it through the Oral History Program and, and the films that Karen has had made by other people, you know. So, and they're all important to who we are, and, and I'm just really thankful to be a part of it. And I'm hoping that the oral histories we've done in the past, and the teaching people how to do oral histories, and then, and then, the interns, you know, doing oral histories, you know, we will capture those moments that you know eventually will be lost in time. I saw this today on it was Walt Wolfram, you know, who did, studied the Brogue on Ocracoke, and he said, in 25 years, there won't be anybody speaking the Brogue. 25 years, that's not long. I'm going to cry. But hopefully not. I mean the Brogue is in the oral history tapes, and in the videos, and in the ducks that are carved and the hunters and the foods we eat and the books we read and the books we publish, and the things that we remember and the things that—And to me, you know, I try to write music about people who have made an impact on me, like Nitty Morrow from the Promised Land, like James Allen Rose here on Harkers Island, you know, and others who, who just. And Stacy, my daddy's hometown, you know, I wrote that song for Dad and named all the communities Down East. And in fact, one of the folklorists from, that teaches in the mountains at Appalachian State, used that song to talk about naming communities in music, you know. And so I was honored by that. That was taken with that viewpoint, and we've always had a lot of good people from universities helping us. Greenville, all those interns that were doing work on the whaling industry. One of my personal friends was Karen Baldwin, who was the head of the folklore section of East Carolina University and was head of the folklore collection, and she helped to mentor me, mentor me. She would come, and her husband, Ernie, would come and stay at my house. And she was a birder, and so she taught me how to love birds. Abd then down in, down in Wilmington, you know, they have a great program going on down there. And I don't know too many people that that way, but David Cecelski and Alton Ballance over at Ocracoke, you know, all these are very important people who have helped further the cause, you know. Big Mac, I mean, and The Blues Are Running [King Mackerel and the Blues Are Running], that was, that's a classic, and they understand, you know. So anyway, talk to me, because I could keep talking.

Anna Marie Switzer 34:46
I mean, there's so much wonderful things that you said. I love the culture as a pink pinky finger and realizing how much culture is here, just even I'm from Charlotte, which—I'm from the suburbs, which doesn't have much innate culture, and it has been a blessing to be able to come and be fully immersed and—

Connie Mason 35:09
And you'd be surprised, there is culture where you're from.

Anna Marie Switzer 35:11
We have a Fourth of July celebration, right?

Connie Mason 35:14
You've got other things too. You just, you just got to open your eyes to what, what makes your community special.

Anna Marie Switzer 35:23

I think, I mean less so that there's not culture, and more so that there's, there's not as many people dedicated to defending it the way that I've seen, just like the determination and drive from Down, these communities has been—

Connie Mason 35:39
Well, you're at a disadvantage because our society is so mobile now that people come and go, and it's hard to develop a sense of community. And so, yeah, I mean, that's why here, you know, our churches, you know, and this place, you know, the Core Sound Waterfowl Museum and our other museums are so important to keep you know, keep us aware, you know, of what's going on and who we are and that type of thing.

Anna Marie Switzer 36:11
Um, I have a couple of specific questions as you were speaking. There was so much more that I—

Connie Mason 36:19
That's okay. Too much?

Anna Marie Switzer 36:21
No, you did, you talked the perfect amount. Um, I was, so I've heard this story about like the National Park Service coming in and out, and I think you have a specifically unique perspective just from being involved in the National Park Service and seeing like the positive, but also understanding the Down East, like the community mindset. And so I was wondering, like during the time where there was all that conflict, including the fires, how were you personally feeling during that time? And then also, was there any animosity towards you because you were somewhat affiliated?

Connie Mason 37:02
Well, though not really, but, but I'm, but I need to clarify that I was working in the bottom of the Scott Building, you know. And I think I told this story at the at the luncheon we had about—I was in the bottom and in the second floor was my boss. And we had an intercom system, and I was working down there, and my boss came on the intercom. Says there's a woman from Harkers Island here. She's really mad. She needs to talk to you, and it was Karen, and at that time, she was working on the “Island Born and Bred” cookbook. And I don't know if she had an inkling of a museum or not at that point. And I didn't have, I didn't think I'd be working for a museum either at that point, you know, we were just babes-in-toyland sort of kind of thing. But, um, so here she comes in. She was pregnant. I mean, man, she was about to bust a gusset, and, and she wanted pictures, you know? And so I tried, she, and she found out that my father was Stacy. She says, “What in the hell are you doing here? Why are you working for these people?” So, you know, there happened to be a poster of John Muir's Why the Park Service is important, why preserving these things were important. And I pointed that out. And, you know, she was like, you know, but anyway, so I tried to help her the most I could. And at that point, and I heard through the grapevine, they were doing a coalition correlating the cookbook. And so I went down in my gray and my green and my badge and my red wing tip boots and went to the to the church, and I helped, you know, collate the cookbook. And she came up to me, she says, “What the hell are you doing?” I said, “Well, I'm trying to help,” you know. So from that point, I think we had a friendship, because she invited me to her house and she showed me all her wonderful things that her grandmother left her, you know, her sewing machine and other

things that were just so valuable to her. And I enjoyed seeing those things and looking at them. And so she got involved with the guild, the Decoy Carving Guild, and, and they started having the shows. And I got involved with the show. Oh, well, before that, I couldn't get on permanently with the Park Service because the Vietnam War had ended, and there was it was just a flood of vets, which I do not have any resentment toward them for doing that. I mean, because they need those jobs and but, you know, I was not going to be able to get on permanently. I kept getting 180-day appointments. They liked what I was doing. I kept doing the oral history interviews with Portsmouth people and adding to them and doing, you know, organizing it and all that, and it was good. They were happy with it. So they kept hiring me. It was like being a school teacher with the summers off, and, I mean, with the winters off instead of the summers. And so I also helped the fellow who was the collections manager at the North Carolina Maritime Museum, and working with David Bumgarner, was his name, and he said, Listen, I'm getting ready to leave. You know, you should apply for my job. So I did. And in a nutshell, I got the job. I don't know how I got the job, because my education was not that, and it was just experience, and I got more and more experience. I worked 18 years with the North Carolina Maritime Museum in collections management, and I got involved with a lot of the professional organizations and kept my Park Service friendship with a lot of people. You know, that's a community, too. You know all the people, you know, Wayne and Margaret and uh, the Bernies, you know. I mean, they, they were all people that, you know, mean a lot to me. So anyway, that's, that, so a personal animosity, maybe at first with the—Karen could not understand why I was there, but I think, I think the person that helped her the most understand what the Park Service was supposed to be was Bob Vogel. Yeah, it was Bob Vogel all the way. And, I mean, because we really have had some bad superintendents—don't quote me on that. We've really had some really bad, bad things happen. But he was the best. He was the best, and he was personified what the Park Service was supposed to be doing in a community. And so that was that was really good.

Anna Marie Switzer 43:01
I was gonna say in that Park Service community, I was interested in listening to your interview with—I read it, but with your interview with Norma Clark, have you heard from other places, like, is this conflict between the community and like the National Park Service, is that as intense in other places?

Connie Mason 43:23
It has been. Yeah, she told me that it was the worst she'd ever had was here, I think, was what she was telling me. And I mean, you know, they tried to run her off the road, basically kill her. And she was concerned about the local law enforcement was also against them. You know, they found all this pot over their island, and they had to put it in their trunk of their cars because they didn't trust the sheriff.

Anna Marie Switzer 43:54
I was reading that. I was like, what is happening?

Connie Mason 43:57
Yeah, I know, I know it was, it was weird. They had—and so they had taken the Coast Guard station, federal installation and burn it all. And imagine it was nice to be upwind of that. It was, it was quite a time. And she, she would go to the grocery store in her, in her uniform, and I, you read about this I'm sure, and they wouldn't wait

on her. They wouldn't wait on her. And so, you know, I'm the kind of person that I don't notice things like that. You know, I'm just, I'm easy going, except my sisters tell me that I am the worst bitch in the world.

Anna Marie Switzer 44:45
That's a sister thing.

Connie Mason 44:46
That's a sister thing, you know. And I understand that, but I try to be easy going and try not to take too offense easily and I understood, and I listened, you know. And it's the job of oral history, oral historian, is to listen and I understood where everybody was coming from. And so, you know, it is, it's, I'm diplomatic that way, in the fact that all my cousins lived Down East, but I went to school at East, uh, West Carteret. And we had a rivalry between East Carteret and West Carteret, and it was called, and we fought for the Mullet Bucket in football. And when we had those football matches, I never sat down on either side. I walked around the field the whole game and said hello to everybody, and I did, didn't commit to one or the other, because I couldn't. Because I couldn't, you know, it was just, it was just, I just couldn't. So anyway. That's, I guess it was just me.

Anna Marie Switzer 46:06
Do you consider yourself from Down East?

Connie Mason 46:09
I do.

Anna Marie Switzer 46:10
You've got graves down here.

Connie Mason 46:13
That's right, that's right, where your people are buried. You know my mother was the youngest of nine children, and almost all the girls, with the exception of three, married Down East men. So.

Anna Marie Switzer 46:34
Sorry. Where was your mother from?

Connie Mason 46:36
My mother was from Morehead, but her father and mother were from Greenville, from Pitt County area. They moved down here. They moved to Crab Point in 1922, and my grandfather was a blacksmith, but he loved to hunt and fish. My grandmother, my mother's mother, was the farmer. She loved farming. Okay? They moved down here because up in Greenville, there were a lot of bootleggers, and as a blacksmith, they wanted him to fix the stills, and he said, if I get caught, I'm going to jail, and Mary, his wife, is going to be left with these children, and I can't do that. So he left. They made a decision, because he was a blacksmith, and it was so much bootlegging going on up there that he moved down here, and he bought the farm. He had, he had to get a loan in 1922 which was not easy, but he got one. And all those children, you know, they raised tobacco and worked in the back of fields, and they had tobacco barns, you know, they had a barn that grandmother would grade the

tobacco up in the upstairs loft. And it was, you know, it was a dark and wooden, you know, crudely built place. You know, that my mother, when she was a kid, fell down and broke her collarbone, and I'll never forget that. She said that was the most painful thing she'd ever had, was breaking her collarbone. But so when Mother—okay, her oldest sister, Maybelle, married Weldon Fulcher from Stacy. Okay, so Mother would go down and help her sister Maybelle with housing. And she had two kids, and they were the same age as my mother, because as the oldest of nine children, and you know, she had children that were as same age as my mother, Dare and Earl. And she would go down there and play with them and help take care of them. And she and Dare went down to one of the stores in Stacy to get ice cream, and that's where she met my father. And my father was a character at best. He was, you know, he saw my mother, thought she was beautiful, and he saw her, and went right up to her and kneeled down on one knee and said, “Will you marry me?” Well, my mother had a nickname. It was, she was called Old Stone Face, and she didn't make a, she didn't flinch, nothing. She just looked the other way. Well, that's, that's where their romance began.

And of course my aunt, Maybelle, did not like my father. She knew of his reputation. He loved to drink and quarrel and, you know. But he had, he had one of the only cars in Stacy, and he would take a bunch of people to work, you know, including my Aunt Maybelle. He was a very generous person, and he had a good heart, you know, he was just looking for that right girl, and he found her. And so when I was born, first thing he did was take me Down East, you know, and I think just to get me out of mother's hair, because I was a type A personality, and I was into everything. And my Aunt Beulah and Uncle Dan, you know, took care of me, and my aunt, my cousin, Lyda and I grew up together, and we're, we're good friends, and she's got all, all her, her chil'rens there now in in Stacy. And I grew up with my daddy being a hunter and a fisherman. He loved to fish, and we grew up, you know, he built a house right on the Newport River, okay? And he was on the river because he wanted to take his boat out and set his net. So I learned about nets. I learned about fishing with a net. I learned to, he taught me had a pole with an oar on one side of the boat, you know. And in the summer times, I would, I had a skiff, a wooden skiff, and I would, I would take the blow torch and scrape the paint off of her, you know, and then paint her. And I called her—this will tell you when, about when this was—I named her the Hey Jude, and Daddy would take us out, you know, and in the boat and pull the net in. He had a net, and he also, he would love to go hunting and fishing when he when he was a, when he became an accomplished, a successful accountant, he had some money, and so he got a nice fish, nice—it was a ski boat, but he used it as a fishing boat. And he would trawl, and he had fishing buddies that he'd go out fishing with and he would catch king mackerel and all these and he would always tell about. You know, fishing is no good anymore, because, you know, used to, I would, we would go out fishing. We catch, you know, four or five coolers full of fish, and now you can only get one cooler a fish. And I remember him coming home one day, and I was about three years old, and he had killed a Canada goose, and he was holding it by the neck, and he come in the door and he said, “I got a goose.” You know, and I couldn't say it. All I said was a “goo.” From then on, every time we saw a goose, even when I was in the 50s, 50 years old. “Connie, there's a goo.” And when I see a Canada goose now, or hear one, hear 'em honking, I think of my father, because my father could actually call him down, you know, he could make a goose call out of his own throat, you know. And I tried to do that one time, and I said, You know what? You got to live by yourself to practice that because and my cats, I scared my cats to death, so I had to quit. I didn't, I didn't call the geese anymore.

But, so when I hear a goose, I think of my daddy and so. But my mother, she was kind of prim and proper, you know. And she, you know, Daddy taught me how to clean a fish. You know, how to go to fish, how to clean a mullet. You know, how to scale it, you know. And Mother didn't know how to do any of that. And, but my grandmother, my grandmother, cooked possum and duck and, you know, raccoon. I mean, you know, they ate whatever was closest. That's what they ate. Because, you know, she had family of nine kids, and so she, she was an old-fashioned woman, you know, and I remember sitting underneath the pecan tree with her when I was three years old, you know, shelling beans into her lap with her apron. And then she pulled out my granddaddy's old pocket knife, and she peeled an apple, and she said, “Now watch this.” And she peeled it without cutting, you know, she peeled the whole apple with one peel, and then she would just cut it up and give me some. And so, you know, and she also, she raised chickens, and she had biddies in her, in her biddy house, and they never let me hold one because Mother, Mother told me later. She says, “Grandmother didn't want you to hold one because you'd name it, and we'd have to bring it home.” And I couldn't have one. So anyway, but Daddy brought home some ducks one time for Mother to cook. And Mother didn't cook wildlife. I mean, you know, they just invented TV dinners just for her. And Daddy came home one day, and smoke was pouring out of the oven. He said, “Oh my God,” you know. And my mother ran up. She pulled out the ducks. She didn't cut the feet off of them, and it burned them to a crisp ever like that. And my grandmother, when she told my grandmother she had done that, she said, “No, I'm so ashamed of you.” But anyway, so yeah, I think of myself as being a Core Sounder, because that's where my heart is. That's where you know, my people are buried. You know my aunt, my aunt and my uncles are buried in Stacy and my cousins, and Stacy really wanted my daddy to be buried there, and, but he had bought a plot in in Morehead, and so that's where he was buried. He died first, and this, of course, mother's there now too. And I don't know where I'm going. I might be—I don't know, I don't know. So we'll see. We'll see. But after a while you get to thinking about those things.

Anna Marie Switzer 57:27
Karen talks about it.

Connie Mason 57:28
Yes, yes. Where am I going to be gone? Where am I spending the rest of the time? But I do know that wherever I am, I'm going to have a monument somewhere, so that those people doing ancestry can find me, you know, because that's important. That's important. Okay, I'm ready for another one.

Anna Marie Switzer 57:51
All right. Well, I mean, truly, all of this has been so lovely. I'm a—I guess this doesn't work, really work for the recording, but I'm a writer, and so I truly appreciate great stories.

Connie Mason 58:04
Oh, great.

Anna Marie Switzer 58:05
So that's just lovely just to hear. For our exhibit, we're going to be trying to focus on change. Karen really wants us to try to push the idea that change has always been there, and it's going to continue to be there, and how we

can work from that. And so in looking at the past and your experience in Down East, what would you say, like those big moments of change are change that you're continuing to see?

Connie Mason 58:34
Continuing to see. Well, the climate change is concerned to all of us. Political change. This election coming up is pretty important. There, there's, there's the changing of the guard of the old and the new. As far as you know, the younger generation replacing the older generation, and they're ,and maybe they're thinking and then being a little bit more lenient and a little more tolerant. But the Park Service coming was a big, it was big and it, there's, there's no two ways about it. And Cherry Point was, I mean, when fishing started going south, started declining, you know, Cherry Point made it possible, you know, and World War Two was a big change. World War Two, up until World War Two, there was no refrigeration in boats. So when they caught something, the by boat, from the fish house, had to go out to the boats that were fishing, and they would get the catch and put it in their boat and take it to the fish house. Okay, they might have some a little bit of ice, but that's it. So, so that all changed. You know, with World War Two changed a lot of things. Refrigeration was a big was a biggie, radar was a biggie, because and then aircraft changed menhaden fishing. Menhaden fishing up to this point, the people would go up in the crow nest to look for the—now with, with all these ex-pilots and planes, they could go up and spot them in the schools, in the airplanes, change fishing that way. So, yeah, World War Two. What else? Oh, the people, the splashes in the gene pool. I mean that happened, you know, and then, and the, of course, the light, the lighthouse changed things. I mean, Coast Guard changed things a lot of in the first, the lifesaving stations. They actually wanted to get local men and local boats, because they knew how to get in and out of the surf. And so that became a career for some people, for some men, you know, being local and knowing how to do the boats, how to build the boats, you know that that's something that that changed things. And then the lighthouse keeper, you know, and the modern day Coast Guard. And then World War Two also had, you know, the gun mounts out of the Cape. They put a submarine net across the bight, you know, to keep submarines out. I am writing a booklet right now, and I hope it to make it a little bit more so and better, but for the Diamond City Homecoming, I'm writing with a friend of mine, Phyllis Gentry. She's done a lot of research on Dr Ben Royal. Dr. Ben Royal's people all came from Shackleford Banks, and he helped develop the hospital Cherry Point. He was the, he's the, he was an instrumental in getting Cherry Point put where it was, but where it is now. And a lot of people don't know that.

Anna Marie Switzer 1:03:31
Could you elaborate a little bit on that? I'd love to hear about that.

Connie Mason 1:03:40
He, his grandparent, great grandparents were Marmaduke Royal and Caledonia Royal off of Shackleford Banks. His grandfather was the lighthouse keeper at Cape Lookout. Okay, when Morehead started having the railroad come with the big hotel there, and tourism started being a big thing. The man who was the lighthouse keeper, his son, moved to Morehead with his wife. And Dr. Royal was born there, but his lineage is, and he carved birds. Now, look, you can't get any closer than—he kept, he didn't smoke. He told me he's—I mean, now he didn't tell me, but it was told that he kept a piece of wood in his pocket with his pocket knife, instead of smoking when he got worried about something he would carve. Now look, that's you can't get any closer to being Down East than that, and his house was described as being full of birds. He and the Lighthouse. I mean, all that was so important

to him, and then I'm going to have it all in that book, me and Phyllis, and we're going to have pictures and stuff later. But it was amazing, the influence. Because, you know, people think of Shackleford Banks: “these were ignorant people.” These were not ignorant people. These are smart, smart, smart people. Because to survive out there, you had to be smart. You had to know how to read the weather. You had to know how to get fish and keep it, you know. You had to know how to feed your family. You know, how to survive, you know. And, so I think it's important, and Dr. Royal started the hospital, first hospital in Morehead City, and he went, he went to medical school. Soon as he got out, he came back to Morehead, and he's the one that started. He and Wallace, who was from Portsmouth, North Carolina, they made their money in menhaden fishing, okay, and they were, they were the Wallace family. He and Mr. Wallace and Webb were all good friends, and they would be whittling while talking about what Morehead needed to be a good community and what the community needed. And so after all the years of all the things that he was instrumental in, and I'm going to have them listed, you know, in the book, or the booklet. They named him Morehead City's citizen of the century. Dr. Ben Royal from Shackleford Banks. Now that, to me, is so important, you know, that's why I'm doing this little thing with Phyllis, because she's done all the research. And I'm doing, I'm having to do some other research too, because some things I need to clarify, but, but I think, I think it's going to show those people who think not so good things about us, how what smart people we are. So anyway, I'm going to shut up.

Anna Marie Switzer 1:07:32
No, no, no, I would love once, once you guys get that booklet send together. I'll email Karen or call you. I would love to see that.

Connie Mason 1:07:44
Absolutely, you're welcome to have one. So we're—I just talked to Phyllis yesterday, and she's come to the Diamond City Homecoming, and she's going to bring her notebooks. Now, she's got multiple sclerosis and can't get around very well, but she's done all this research over the years, and she was actually one of the Coast Guard babies that was raised at the Cape. And O’Boyle was her mother, mother and daddy's name, O’Boyle. And the O’Boyle house over there on the Cape was the house she was raised in. So I got a picture of her from, well, it's not very flattering, but she's a little baby, you know, no clothes on, but she's, she's along the porch with all the conch shells along the porch. So, you know, this is great picture and—but she was born in Dr. Royal's hospital, and I have to tell you this, because it's important to me that. When I was growing up, I got a needle stuck in my foot, and I had to go get it operated on. So I was in the Morehead City Hospital, and I was about, oh, eight years old, maybe, and my mother put me in the wheelchair, you know, to take me down the hall. And she stopped, and she bent down, and she said to me, “now I'm going to introduce you to this man, and I want you to always remember it.” And it was, it was Ben Royal, Dr. Royal. She, she introduced me to him, you know, and, and he didn't live long after that was probably three or four years, and he died. He didn't die in Morehead, he died in Durham or something, but I think he was, he must have been visiting or something. He's talking to—you know how old men like to talk. But anyway, but I got to meet Dr. Royal and my mother—to this day I can, I can still hear “So I want you to never forget that you met this man.” It's good stuff, good stuff, good stuff,

Anna Marie Switzer 1:10:10
Morehead man of the century.

Connie Mason 1:10:11
That's right, that's right. She wanted me to remember. And so anyway, it's going to be a good little publication, and I'll see that you get one, Karen will. I know she will. She's good that way, and I know she appreciates y'all, and I appreciate y'all, too. So thanks for your time, and I hope I didn't go off on too many rabbit trails because I'm a talker.

Anna Marie Switzer 1:10:41
Oh, truly I was gonna say, if you have anything else.

Connie Mason 1:10:46
No, don't say that. No, no, no.

Anna Marie Switzer 1:10:49
Well, Karen has this for sure, coming back, so maybe if I come back again.

Connie Mason 1:10:55
Okay, well, I might have shot my whole lot this time

Anna Marie Switzer 1:11:00
Well, we can come back and just talk, not on the recording, yeah.

Connie Mason 1:11:03
Well, well, and let Karen hear and say “That's not what I wanted her to say it all,” so, you know. But anyway, we tried.

Anna Marie Switzer 1:11:14
I hope that's all right. Well, I'll turn this one off. Okay.